



*Chris
Higgins*

The Secrets Club

*Alice
in the
Spotlight*

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON



Chapter 1

‘Ready, Alice?’ asks Mum, but she knows I am. I’ve been ready for weeks. Six actually. I’ve been ready since the first day of the summer holidays when she took me to town to buy my new school uniform.

Mum likes to be prepared. So do I.

Though if I’m being really honest, my things might be ready, but I’m not sure I am. Not deep inside.

I haul my new school bag up on to my shoulder. It’s mega heavy. No wonder. It contains:

- an exercise book for every subject, all neatly covered and labelled
- a rough book
- a pocket-sized French dictionary
- a much bigger English dictionary with handy thesaurus

- files for IT and DT
- a geometry set
- a wallet containing emergency money
- a pencil case

All of them brand new and carefully chosen by me.

Inside the pencil case are new pencils, sharpened to within an inch of their lives; a new sharpener; new pens; a new rubber and new felt tips.

I love my new stuff. But I can't help feeling guilty about it. Particularly since I showed it to Austen and he pointed out that none of it had been recycled from primary school.

It was all Nikki's fault. She wanted to come with us that day to help me sort out my uniform and she insisted on treating me.

I did try. 'I don't need a new bag!' I'd protested. 'I've got a perfectly good one already. And a pencil case. And loads of biro's and felt tips . . .'

I don't know why I bothered. She never listens to anyone.

'That tatty old stuff!' she'd jeered. 'New school, new beginning! Go mad for once, Ali. I'm paying.'

So I did.

My sister Nikki is always splashing her money around. Mum says now she's earning she should start putting some away for a rainy day, but Nikki doesn't do rainy days. She lives her life in permanent sunshine and it's money – not water – that pours through her fingers and down the drain.

I'm the opposite. I'm so careful. Nikki says it's painful. I can't help it. Mum says it's not that I'm mean, I'm a thinker, and she wishes Nikki would do a bit more thinking before jumping feet first into things.

I think about everything. Ever since Austen was put to sit next to me at the start of Year Four, I especially think about Consumerism and Waste and Global Warming and Saving the Planet. Austen was really into the environment and soon I was too. *The Eco-Twins*, our teacher called us.

Dad says it's like with Nikki every cloud has a silver lining, and with Alice every silver lining has a cloud. He used to want me to lighten up a bit, be more like her. But now he wants her to tone it down a bit. A lot. Especially after last night.

Nobody would ever think we were sisters. She's always laughing; I'm mostly serious. Though actually, we are kind of alike. Same dark hair,

pale skin, wide brown eyes, high cheekbones and sort-of-pouty lips.

You can see the resemblance in her school photo when she was my age, though her eyes were all blotchy. Eleven years old and she was wearing make-up even then. She's unbelievable! She'd been made to wash her eyeliner and mascara off and her eyes were stinging from the soap, but she was still smiling for the camera.

But you'd have to look really close to see the likeness now. You see, I would never wear cosmetics because I read somewhere they're demeaning to women, plus Austen told me they're made from animal products. Anyway, I can't stand anything on my face. I even scrape my hair out of the way in a ponytail. Whereas Nikki's got to have hair extensions, false eyelashes, false nails and a full mask of make-up in place before she'd even consider going out of the front door.

'Come on, Trouble.' Dad's giving me a lift because it's my first day. He always calls me Trouble because I'm not. It's his sort of joke. He calls Nikki Angel, when they're speaking, that is, and she's definitely not angelic.

They're not speaking today; Nikki's staying well out of his way.

‘Have a good time!’ says Mum. She plants a kiss on my cheek and dashes upstairs to get ready for work.

Here we go. I pick up my PE kit in one hand and my lunch box in the other and wait in the narrow hallway while Dad gets the van out of the garage. My school bag bangs against the wall. I’ve got too much stuff. I want to take everything out and start all over again.

I’ve got stomach ache. I feel sick. I want to go back to bed.

I don’t want to go to this new school any more.

